

HOPPING OWL AND THE SILVER FOXES

by Shelia Benskin

Hopping Owl, the most renowned medicine woman in the Cherokee Sovereign Nation, learned everything she knew from her husband, Sweeping Eagle. He was the greatest medicine man ever known to the Cherokee. He had come from a long line of medicine men. The two never had any children so they claimed all of the children of the Cherokee Nation as their own.

As true spirit warriors, they warded off evil from those entrusted in their care. They were a powerful pair traveling from village to village throughout the Southeast always welcomed by their fellow tribesmen. They were loved and revered throughout the Cherokee Nation. When they returned from their travels, their home tribe threw a big celebration in their honor.

Sweeping Eagle and Hopping Owl were returning home after a long journey. They traveled the same route they always took since it was the only way in or out of the village. When they came to the trail down the mountain, it had been moved. Their eyes were drawn to the sky. Dancing high above them was a long string of silver foxes. Clutched in their paws was the trail that led to their home village.

Sweeping Eagle and Hopping Owl had been traveling for many days and nights. They were very tired and anxious to get back to the village. The leader of the silver foxes was easily recognizable by the crown of eagle feathers atop his head.

“Oh great silver fox,” Sweeping Eagle cried out in respect, “we beseech you to lower our path so that we can be on our way.”

Great Silver Fox looked down at them. His red eyes glared angrily. “Find another way!” He shouted. “Silly Cherokee, can’t you see we are busy dancing!”

“Oh mighty Silver Fox, there is no other way and we must return for we have important news for our village.”

“Then you must wait!” The silver fox leader announced arrogantly. If he could only keep them away for seven days, the fox kingdom would be strong enough to take over the village. This village had the most fertile soil and richest hunting grounds in all the land. Whoever controlled this village would control the world itself. Great Silver Fox salivated at the thought of being crowned Supreme Ruler of Everywhere.

Sweeping Eagle interrupted his dream. “How long must we wait?” The two Cherokee bowed in respect.

“Until we tire!” Now annoyed, Great Silver Fox mocked them to the laughter of the other foxes.

Sweeping Eagle and Hopping Owl waited patiently. Two days passed and then three. The stakes were high. Great Silver Fox was determined to drive the powerful duo back down the other side of the mountain. The other foxes began to complain. “We’re hungry. Oh Greatest of Foxes Everywhere let us stop for a bite to eat.” They begged.

“I forbid you to stop. You are the best of the silver foxes. Food will only slow you down. Now keep dancing!” Great Silver Fox’s gruff response struck terror in their hearts. Night fell. The foxes eyes drooped heavily with sleep. “Great Fox let us nap for a few moments. With a little rest we promise to dance even faster.”

“Rest is for the weak. You were chosen for this task because you have the strength to resist fatigue. Now keep dancing.”

Fearing for their lives, the foxes dare not challenge their fierce leader, never once stopping to rest, sleep or even eat.

Hopping Owl grew weary of the constant chatter of those dancing foxes. “Sweeping Eagle, you have more than enough arrows and you are an expert marksman. Shoot them down so that we can be on our way. We haven’t much time. We must warn the villagers of the soldiers who come to take our land.” Hopping Owl urged Sweeping Eagle to take action.

“We must have patience, Hopping Owl. The night before our journey home, I dreamed that we would meet these very same silver foxes on our way home. They are magic. Any harm to them from one of our arrows will bring swift and certain destruction of the entire Cherokee Nation.”

Hopping Owl had seen many of Sweeping Eagle’s dreams come to pass. She took the warning seriously and joined her husband in waiting the foxes out.

On the fourth day, their patience paid off. Despite the demands of their leader, the foxes showed signs of slowing down. On the fifth day those silver foxes were dancing so slowly that they looked to be suspended in mid air. By the sixth day, they stopped dancing altogether. As soon as each fox stopped dancing, it floated lower and lower to the ground, one by one falling to earth. As each fox hit the side of the mountain, pouf! It disappeared. The only fox left was the great leader. He would not give up.

Though alone, he kept dancing desperately holding onto the pathway. By now, the trail was so fed up with being jostled about that it unexpectedly turned on the great

silver fox catching him by complete surprise. It wrapped itself tightly around him. Every inch of his great body was buried in rocks, dirt and grass. Then the path twirled and swirled around faster than a thundering twister. Suddenly it stopped and opened up. The great silver fox leader had disappeared. The trail floated happily and slowly down to the feet of Hopping Owl and Sweeping Eagle. They rushed down the trail to the safety of their village.

Though it was summer, that very evening a terrible storm blew in from nowhere. Freezing rain turned to ice and then snow. The entire trail was covered in mounds of snow and ice making it impassable. When the storm hit, soldiers were close to the top of the mountain. Blinding snow drove them back down. The storm raged on the mountaintop for weeks. Each attempt the soldiers made to cross over the mountain seemed to make the storm rage more fiercely. Many soldiers lost their lives. Many more lost limbs to frostbite.

Beneath the mountain in the rich valley, the Cherokee went about life as normal. The inclement weather did not reach down into their land. Most Cherokee often looked up at the stormy mountaintop bewildered at the raging snow clouds, but not Hopping Owl and Sweeping Eagle. They looked at the mountain in deep reverence for blanketing them under its protective forces.

As for those foxes, even today it is said that if you look ever so closely in the earth of that mountain, you can see the foxes captured inside, never to be released again. The great silver fox still lays helplessly trapped in the mountain path, trampled underneath the feet of any who cross.